

## THE TWO SALOMES.

XIII.

## AN ENGAGEMENT.

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Mrs. Gerry was conscious of a very helpless feeling when she heard her daughter make that remark about the crows. She replied that she supposed that the crows must fly somewhere. "Oh, yes, mother," said Salome, earnestly, "but not between me and the sunlight, and when I am with —" she hesitated; then she went on, "when I am with Randolph Moore."

Having said this, Salome lapsed into silence. The wind seemed to be rising from the east. The waves began to pound on the farther side of Anastasia. The light from the large moon made the sand glisten sharply. The still spikes of a Spanish bayonet tree shone with a hostile aspect. But the air was sweet with an intoxicating mingling of odors.

Mrs. Gerry was becoming more and more depressed.

Suddenly from the direction of the truck farm which they were now approaching they heard the drawing, nasal tones of their landlord: "I've been a-aimin' to hang that thur do' for some weeks now," Mr. Maine said, "but I'm so kinder crowded with work, 'n' my wife she's continually 'meddlin' wood cut, or sumptin'. A man can't 'supplish nothin', if he has er wife. Women 'sufferin' nothin'. Course, you c'n hang them if you want er. I shan't put nothin' in thur do' if you hangin' them do'. I ain't thur man to put nothin' in no other man's way; I ain't."

"All right," responded a clear, energetic voice. "Then I'll do it. I've been a-aimin' to hang it, too. Only I never could think of the confounded too. But I've got them this time, eren, Maine, told up the door, can't you, while I measure about these things?"

The two women had paused involuntarily at sound of that voice, for both recognized it as belonging to Moore.

Salome's grasp tightened on her mother's hand. Into the girl's eyes there sprang a new light.

"It's Mr. Moore," said Mrs. Gerry's calm tones. "So he has come back."

The elder woman walked forward, but Salome lingered for a moment under the banana shrub. She saw Moore drop his tools and turn eagerly. She saw that, while he greeted her mother, his glance sprang to her.

She came forward demurely now, and held out her hand.

She said she hoped he had had a successful trip. Had he sold many goods?

Moore held her hand. She repeated her question about the goods.

"I don't know," he answered. "I believe so; that is, I forget. I'm sure I don't care."

Salome tried to withdraw her hand, but could not.

"Not care?" she exclaimed, "aren't you afraid that those people who employ you will turn you off?"

"No. I am only afraid that they are not sufficiently glad to see me. I have been gone for months—years."

"You have been gone five days and about three-quarters of a day."

"Then the time has seemed as short as that to you, in a melancholy tone."

"Time has literally flown with me."

"Salome!"

"Oh, how inconsiderate you are!"

"Inconsiderate because time has flown? Would you have had it drag? Would you have had me suffer—hang my head and weeping because you were travelling about and enjoying yourself? Tell me that!"

The girl laughed gently. Her eyes shone humbly. She was afraid, her happiness made her tremble and draw aloof.

"I don't want you to suffer," said Moore, gazing at her wistfully. He thought he had not half known how attractive she was to him—and the moonlight—or was it the moonlight?

The black and white bound came from within the hut and stood by the door, looking up and wagging his tail.

Salome bent down to stroke his head. But Moore did not notice the animal; he did not know the dog had come.

"Thank you for not wanting me to suffer," was the somewhat airy response.

The young man stood in silence. He was puzzled and grieved. But he would not relinquish the girl's hand.

He had lived their meeting over and over, and his imagination had not once made it in the least like this.

He drew his companion away among the pine trees, Jack following with his head hanging.

Moore thought he would try a more matter of fact kind of conversation. He put Salome's hand through his arm. He endeavored not to look at her for a moment, but he found his eyes constantly returning to her face.

He was telling himself that he loved her a thousandfold more than when he had seen her last.

But he began bravely on his matter of fact topic.

"I had a disagreeable kind of a piece of work down in Tampa," he said. "There's a fellow there who has been using our firm's name. He has done it twice. But the last time was once too many. Our Mr. Donaldson wired me to act my own judgment—said he wouldn't overlook it again, even though the man had a wife with him. I felt as if I was a criminal myself. It was heart-breaking—and then his wife—no, I swear I'll never be mixed up in such an affair again! You see, I'm too soft. I can't see people suffer—and I thought of you, Salome. But I'm thinking of you always. I thought of how your kind heart would grieve for that woman—and for the man, too; and I hated myself—and yet I was doing right. Why do you sometimes hate yourself when you are doing right?"

Salome did not answer. She had clasped her other hand over her companion's arm, and was now really leaning upon him.

Moore looked down at her. He forgot what he had been talking about. Why should he remember when at last she glanced up at him?

But she did not let the subject drop.

"You said he forged?" she asked. She hung upon his arm.

"Yes, but don't let us talk about him any more. You see, I was driven to saying something because—because you didn't seem glad to see me?"

"Not glad to see you?"

She touched her cheek for an instant against the sleeve of his coat. But when he bent eagerly over her she withdrew a little and said:

"But I want to talk more about that man?"

"What man?"

"Why, the forger. I suppose it is a crime?"

"Well, I should think so. And a particularly mean, underhanded crime, too—to use another person's name."

"Yes, I suppose it is," said the girl. "But, of course, it doesn't shock me as it ought. But, of course, I know—I know."

Moore stopped in his slow walk. He looked surprised.

"Why on earth should we talk about forgers when we haven't seen each other for—four months?" he asked.

"For five and three-quarter days," was the reply; and she smiled at him. While she still

smiled she continued, "But I have a special interest in forgers."

"Why?"

"You will be extremely shocked if I tell you."

Moore's surprise increased. "What a curious girl you are!"

"Yes, I think I must be." She gazed up at him now with a deep seriousness. "Still," she went on, "you think you—think you care for me?"

"Think? I am sure. It seems to me there is nothing else I care for in the world."

He spoke with impetuous quickness.

"Oh, yes, there is something else," he said, though with the serious look still in his eyes.

"What is that? But you are mistaken, Salome," earnestly.

"Am I? But don't you care to sell a large bill of goods? Isn't that what you call it?"

Moore laughed joyfully. He pressed his hand over her clasped hands on his arm.

"Who told you that?" he asked. "I believe I am a tolerably good drummer boy. That's why I get a good salary. That's why I am able now to take care of you, Salome; why, I am able now, we might be married directly. I will ask your mother. Let us ask her now. There is not the slightest use in waiting."

He spoke hurriedly. He had that fear so common to lovers that something dreadful would immediately happen to separate him from the woman he loved.

"How foolish you are," exclaimed the girl in response. "Do you think I am going to be hustled from one hand to another like—well, like a bill of goods? No, indeed. I can't be married for a long time to come."

"Why not?"

"There are a thousand reasons."

"Give me one of them."

"I'm going to be Mrs. Darrah's amanuensis for a number of years. I'm learning shorthand and typewriting; I intend to be very useful to her."

Moore looked at him in the moonlight as if he were trying to find some answer to Salome's words. But he found none.

"About how many years? I may ask—do you expect to work for Mrs. Darrah?"

He put this inquiry with a great appearance of calmness.

"I haven't quite decided. Several," was the reply.

She pressed her face still closer against his.

"Have you signed a contract—have you sold yourself, as they used to sell themselves to Satan?" with an increase of vehemence.

"Who used to sell themselves to Satan, Mr. Moore? And Mrs. Darrah is very far from being like Satan."

"If she keeps you from me she is worse than Satan," said Moore, with more sharpness in his tone than the girl had ever heard before.

He made an uncontrollable gesture of anger as he continued, "But what can you expect of an authoress? Women have no business to—"

"Don't say ridiculous things, Mr. Moore," interrupted Salome. "I would write books myself if I could."

"You can't—thank fortune!"

"I'm not so sure of that. Sometimes I feel as if I could."

Moore tried to regain his temper. He could hardly tell why he felt so deeply irritated.

"You know what Alphonse Karr says?" he remarked with some lightness.

"No. I don't know what any one says—least of all Alphonse Karr."

"He says that a woman who writes a book is guilty of two crimes: she increases the number of books and decreases the number of women."

"Then I hate Alphonse Karr!"

After this from Salome there was silence. The two continued to walk on between the trees where the moonlight fell in broad patches on the wiry grass.

The hound paced on behind them.

Salome had now withdrawn her hand from her companion's arm. She looked removed from him. Mrs. Moore's nature was too essentially sweet for him to remain long in anger. But this meeting was so different from what he had anticipated. He could hardly tell why he felt so heart sore.

How coolly Salome had spoken of remaining a number of years with Mrs. Darrah! Of course she did not care for him at all as he cared for her. He did not suppose that women knew much about how to love. Women were so cold, and—

and mysterious.

At this point in his thoughts Moore took the girl's hand and kissed it with the utmost tenderness.

"I suppose I've been wrong some way," he said. "Men are so stupid—that is, we are called stupid."

"But you don't feel stupid," asked Salome.

"Don't let's speak in that way any more. Salome, you don't know how I love you," with kindling eyes, "and I thought, I hoped—Dearest, do you think you do care for me so that in time you will care a great deal?"

Salome drew back. She pressed her hands together while she looked at her lover.

"Don't you know how that will end?" she asked. "Don't you know? It will end in my loving you infinitely more than you love me. I have read that—and now I am sure of it. Yes, now I am sure of it."

"That is impossible! Impossible!" cried Moore.

"I want to tell you that I—"

Salome drew away with a decided movement.

"You know I told you I wanted to talk more about that forger," she said.

Moore stared. His face fell. He had poignantly sense of being baffled. He almost felt that he was being trifled with. But when he saw the girl's face he was more puzzled than ever.

The young man made a great effort and took himself in hand.

"Well," he responded, "I am ready to listen to all you have to say about the forger."

Salome now came a little nearer.

"Did he feel very badly?" she asked with great interest.

"Yes," he said.

Moore was deciding in his own mind that he was entirely helpless in her hands. And he was remembering with a kind of despairing thrill that moment some days ago when she had voluntarily told him that she loved him. It seemed to him that he had thought of nothing but her words, her tone and her face when she had spoken thus.

And now here she was insisting upon talking of that miserable incident. He was very sorry he had mentioned that man.

"I suppose," said the girl, "that was because somebody was going to suffer for what he had done—his wife, for instance."

"Perhaps," was the answer, "and perhaps he was repenting."

"Oh, do you think so? It wasn't so very bad. I suppose your arm are able to bear the loss without much inconvenience?"

This time Moore stared harder than ever.

"It will not inconvenience us very much," he answered.

"Then why do you make such a fuss over it?" inquired Salome.

"I didn't know I had made a fuss." Moore hoped that he should not become any more confused than he was now. Of course she was playing upon him. It was all very strange.

"You said that it was a mean, underhanded kind of a crime," now remarked the girl.

"So it is."

"I must say that I have a great sympathy for that man," said Salome.

Moore caught eagerly at this.

"That is because you have such a kind heart," he exclaimed.

"No, it isn't that," she said.

"Isn't that?"

"No. But I shall shock you if I tell you why."

"Don't mind about shocking me," he replied with a hint of bitterness, "but tell me."

She came nearer to him, she put her hand on his breast.

"Well, it is this," she said, "it is because I'm not sure about right and wrong."

His arm had gone round her quickly when she had approached him.

She leaned against him with a movement full of tenderness and trust.

"No, I don't," she went on. "Now, are you sure you care for me?"

Before he could give the ardent answer which rose to his lips she continued:

"You remember I told you that I didn't care for the higher spiritual life either."

"Salome!" he began, but she would not let him say more.

"I know what it will be when you get away from me, you will begin to think of what I have told you—and it's the truth—and you will wonder about me, and ask yourself if you ought to love me, and by and by, sometimes, when you ask yourself this question, you will answer: 'I must wish that I had loved some one else, perhaps some one else would have made me happier.' That's what you will think. No, no, don't interrupt me! And if you should come to that conclusion after we are married—do you know what a dreadful thing that would be? I could not bear that. I certainly could not bear that."

As she ceased speaking Salome laid her head on Moore's shoulder. She sobbed. But she controlled herself immediately and was perfectly quiet, while her companion held her closely and poured out tenderly sympathetic assurances, the words coming from a full and sincere heart.

At last Salome lifted her face and spoke. But her words did not seem to have any reference to what Moore had just been saying.

"I have been thinking that I don't seem to have any consciousness of my own," she said. "I don't seem to care for anything except to make you good. I would rather not have any. It wouldn't be agreeable to have just enough consciousness to torment one, but not enough to keep one right."

Moore held the girl at arm's length for an instant. His face was radiant with happiness. Of course these were the vagaries of a too sensitive spirit.

"I'm not afraid," he said with the sublime confidence of youth and love. "I can face any destiny except the destiny which takes you from me."

"Do you really feel sure of that?" she whispered.

"Yes, absolutely sure."

"And I need not worry any more about it?"

"No, I don't worry, I don't understand you. You are morbid."

There was that in Moore's tone and face which could not fail to comfort the girl.

"No, I am not morbid," she responded. "I used to be, up North, before I was really alive. But now—"

She bent her head to his shoulder again.

"Now," he repeated, "I am not afraid of you. I am trying to endure your presence, Mr. Moore."

"I am glad you are beginning so early," he said. "For you will be coming to my presence for years and years—as long as we both live."

"I hope so," said his shoulder.

Then Salome suddenly raised her face and quietly passed her hand across her eyes.

"Why do you do that?" she asked.

"And I am afraid I have been a little—a very little sentimental," Mr. Moore.

"You certainly have, Miss Gerry."

"I don't know you were such a tyrant," standing away from him.

"I am," he said, "for you to learn that fact early. Oh, with a quick break in his voice, 'How happy I am!'"

Salome was a few paces from him, her hands held out by her side, as if she stood in a space of moonlight. Was it that light which made her have at that moment a certain intangible appearance as if she were more spirit than flesh?

Moore looked at her with a certain awe, as if he were more spirit than flesh.

"I never want to think of him again," with a swift gesture of her left hand. "But," she added, as if under a strong impulse, "I don't blame him. Perhaps."

Moore waited in silence. He was not now thinking of the forger, though he had mentioned him again.

"Perhaps," went on Salome, "it was a kind of reaction some way, and he may have done it for some one he loved. No, I don't blame him in the least. Are they going to put him in prison, Mr. Moore?"

"I suppose so. But we are going to keep right on conversing on this topic."

"Oh, no. Let us walk down to the Sebastian. Or, better, let us go to bed, and you may finish hating our door, and then you will be making yourself useful, while we may enjoy the pleasures of conversation."

"But I want to talk to the Sebastian. Even that stream will be beautiful in this moonlight, and we may enjoy being romantic."

"No, we have had that kind of thing sufficient for the night. Let us go to bed. The light will serve for putting on those things."

"Hear her talk of that kind of thing? Or hinders?" cried Moore, looking round him as if for an answer.

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